

Sam Yi, Atlanta jazz aficionado and club owner, dies

Yi remembered as 'glue' who fostered a community. ^N

By Rebecca McCarthy

For the AJC

Sam Yi didn't play an instrument, but his deep knowledge about and abiding love for jazz was well-known to the musicians who frequented Churchill Grounds, his music club adjoining the Fox Theatre.

"He had an incredible ear," said jazz pianist Kenny Banks Jr., who was 11 years old when he met Yi on a visit to see his father play in Atlanta. "Churchill Grounds was a 'Cheers' kind of place, where everybody knew your name and everybody was welcome."

Everyone who plays jazz in Atlanta knew the name of Sam Yi, who died Feb. 3 of complications from colon cancer. He was 61.

The son of Sanghu Yi and Sangson Yi, Hyong Kun "Sam" Yi was born in Seoul, South

Korea, and came to California as an 11-year-old with his parents who had work visas with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. By the 1970s, the family had relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, and by 1980, they were naturalized American citizens.

Yi received a scholarship to attend the University of Tennessee, where he studied engineering, economics and business. After graduating, he worked for the home-goods retailer Pier 1, importing merchandise. He moved to Houston, Texas, and then back to Atlanta.

By the early 1990s, he was working as a manager at Café Intermezzo. When the work day ended, he told an interviewer, he would end up at Just Jazz, a club near the café. He frequented the club, studying everything about it, until he felt he knew enough to open his own place.

With co-owner Chris Dean, in 1997 Yi opened Churchill Grounds – honoring Churchill-style cigars, because Yi



Sam Yi was co-owner of Churchill Grounds, a nightclub at the Fox Theatre.

loved smoking cigars, and grounds, because coffee was one of Yi's favorite beverages. The jazz club fronted Peachtree Street in the Fox Theatre building.

Within a year, it was the place for jazz musicians and jazz lovers to go.

"I loved the venue and I loved the vibe," says Jamal Ahmad, whose syndicated radio show "The Soul of Jazz" is heard on WCLK-FM from 2-7 p.m. "It's predominantly a Black culture, and he was comfortable being in that. He had a way of being an ambassador for the music. He was a beautiful cat."

Trumpeter Joe Gransden, a well-known Atlanta-area musician, often leads a 16-piece band. He said that

when he was very young, Yi hired him to play on Monday nights. After the performances, they would sit together at the bar, "and Sam would give me a pep talk and tell me what I could do better."

Churchill Grounds was one of the few clubs that allowed the artists to express themselves musically with no restrictions on what they could play.

"And the hang was just incredible," Gransden said. After finishing gigs elsewhere in metro Atlanta, "everyone would congregate at Churchill Grounds because it was famous all around the country. Lady Gaga, Wynton Marsalis, you name it, all because of Sam. He was the biggest jazz aficionado I ever met, and he curated performances and performers. He would do anything for us."

In 2003, Yi expanded Churchill Grounds into the next building, calling it the Whisper Room. It had a stage, and it was far from the noise and

smoke of the bar.

Add Seymour Jr., a communications official at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, used to stop by Churchill Grounds to talk with Yi about sports and music – and the University of Tennessee, the alma mater of both men. When Seymour told Yi the UT Black Alumni Association didn't have a place to meet, "he told us to come meet at Churchill Grounds and we did. He loved sports and the music and had a really energetic and youthful vibe."

Jazz vocalist Virginia Schenck said with Yi, it didn't matter "if you were new or rusty, you were given an opportunity to take the stage" because Yi created a safe space for everyone. "He was always loving and encouraging and was dedicated to the music and the culture. He's been the glue that held the jazz community together."

Banks Jr. said Yi was his "No. 1 supporter. My first original trio set was at Chur-

chill. I think his support took me farther than anything." During a typical evening at the club, Banks said he would see Yi in the kitchen, then at the bar, "then he would step out and listen to the music. I never saw Sam sit. He was always in motion."

With the Fox Theatre wanting Yi's space, Churchill Grounds closed in 2016. Yi and his wife, Ok Hynn Park – known as Nina Yi – opened Brew and Bird, a beer and chicken restaurant that served chicken wings rated as best in metro Atlanta.

But Sam Yi continued to serve the jazz community. He curated a jazz session every Monday night at TenATL in the East Atlanta Village. And Brew and Bird hosted another jazz jam session on Thursday nights.

In addition to his wife, Sam Yi is survived by his mother, Sangson Yi; his sister, Lily Giffin; and nieces and nephews. There will be a celebration of life March 15. Details will be announced later.